



## Pick Your Path to Health

### **A Stay-Healthy Guide to Vaccines for African American Women**

This September when you are scheduling your children's back-to-school physical and making sure everyone's shots are up-to-date, don't forget yourself.

Chicken pox and measles aren't just childhood diseases. And, immunizations aren't kids' stuff. If you haven't had a vaccine since your own school days, it's time to dig out your old immunization records.

Many vaccine-preventable diseases cause serious symptoms and complications. And most moms can't afford the headache and missed work that comes with not feeling well. Immunizations are a simple, safe and inexpensive way to stay healthy.

Vaccine recommendations differ depending on your age, health, lifestyle, and occupation. Physicians have special advice for pregnant women, older women, and those with health conditions that weaken the immune system. This primer highlights several guidelines, but to guard your health, it's crucial to know your entire vaccine history and risk. Talk to your physician to find out which shots are vital for you.

#### **The flu shot**

Fighting off the flu doesn't have to be an annual event. Instead make a flu shot your new habit. Preventing illness is always healthier than treating it. And each year the influenza vaccine is tailored to prevent that season's strain of the virus.

Pregnancy can worsen flu symptoms, so the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends a flu shot for expectant moms in their second or third trimester. If you're pregnant during flu season, October through March in most places, then talk to your obstetrician.

"Live vaccines, like measles, mumps, rubella and chicken pox are not recommended for pregnant women," says Dr. Stanley A. Gall, an obstetrician gynecologist at the University of Louisville. "But the rest of immunizations are safe."

A seemingly simple flu can also waylay older women especially those with any one of the chronic illnesses that plague the African American community. Seniors suffer diabetes, heart disease, kidney damage, and hypertension-all conditions that make the body more susceptible to the fever, chills, and body aches of the flu.

Unfortunately, many African American seniors miss out on needed immunizations. Among people over age 65 in the United States, just 46 percent of African Americans have had a flu shot within the last year. That rate is lower than whites, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans of the same age, according to a survey from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

### **Hepatitis B vaccine**

Some of the hardest-working sisters are at risk for hepatitis B, a viral disease, which causes tiredness, yellow eyes and skin, and joint pain. The virus is spread through sex or contact with body fluids including blood. The infection is 100 times more contagious than HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, according to the National Coalition for Adult Immunization.

"In a large number of people hepatitis B becomes chronic and can develop into cirrhosis and liver cancer," Gall says.

Doctors recommend the hepatitis B shot for all health care workers and anyone exposed to blood at work. So nurses, hotel housekeepers, teachers of young children, and child care workers need protection. Women who have multiple sex partners or a recent sexually transmitted disease should also have the vaccine.

Hepatitis B is easily transmitted from mother to baby at birth. But your obstetrician can test you for the virus before you deliver, and may be able to stop the transmission. Ask to be screened for hepatitis B to protect your baby's health. Many school systems now require children to be immunized against hepatitis B.

### **Pneumonia Shot**

Anyone over 65-aunties, grandmothers and the deaconesses at church-should have the pneumococcal vaccine, or pneumonia shot. Each year, tens of thousands of seniors are hospitalized for pneumonia. Battling high fever, cough, and chest pains from a pneumonia infection can be life threatening for an older woman already dealing with other health problems.

"As you get older, your immune system is not quite as robust as it used to be. And the pneumonia organism tends to attack those individuals with a weakened immune system," says Gall.

Today the pneumonia shot is more important than ever because the bacteria and viruses are increasingly resistant to penicillin. Doctors have to work harder to cure infections and their arsenal of antibiotics is less and less effective. The pneumonia shot isn't a guarantee you won't get pneumonia, but it can boost the body's natural infection-fighting ability, so symptoms are less severe and the infection clears faster. One pneumonia shot protects most people for a lifetime.

To learn about three other routine vaccines important to African-American women-chicken pox vaccine, tetanus and diphtheria immunization, and the measles, mumps, and rubella shot:

- Call the CDC's National Immunization Hotline at 1-800-232-2522 or visit [www.cdc.gov/nip](http://www.cdc.gov/nip)

Getting your immunizations up to date will lead you down a path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.*